Chapter 115 - Sparring

PoV: Kenzie Valupina Molida

Sweat trickled past her twitching ears, dripping down from Kenzie's forehead as she narrowly leaned backwards, Jin's kick whistling harmlessly by.

She barely had time to catch her breath when—

Slap!

The sharp, ringing impact of flesh hitting metal filled the room.

Jin stumbled back unsteadily, arms up in defense, his cybernetic limbs having absorbed the blow Tom threw his way. Jin's balance was shaky, but Kenzie had no chance to capitalize—not when Tom was already spinning smoothly towards her.

She stayed low, her ears flicking in anticipation, muscles in her legs tightening like coiled springs. With a swift surge of momentum, she shot forward explosively, eyes fixed firmly on Tom's calm, steady face. Her hands reached out, claws carefully retracted.

No scratching allowed, unfortunately.

Tom reacted with his usual measured composure, raising his arms to guard his head as she crashed into him. His bionic-enhanced strength was infuriatingly consistent, letting him brace easily as Kenzie's momentum slammed against him, barely budging from his stance.

She hissed softly in frustration, pivoting instantly around him and aiming a swift kick at his legs instead, hoping to sweep him off his feet. Yet Tom hopped over her attempt, casually sidestepping her follow-up swipe and flashing a tiny grin—quietly confident.

But Kenzie wasn't done.

Her ears flicked sideways, hearing Jin's footsteps quickly closing in behind her.

She planted her foot firmly, pivoting gracefully out of Tom's range and sidestepping Jin's incoming punch at the last possible instant. She felt the displaced air of Jin's strike rustle past her whiskers as she twisted and countered with a swift jab toward his ribs.

Jin moved with surprising grace, clearly having improved his legwork under Sensei's recent guidance. His footwork had become lighter, more precise, allowing him to weave back just enough for Kenzie's strike to miss him by mere centimeters.

He grinned, a determined spark in his eyes.

"You're quick today," he panted, clearly already feeling the exertion of the last ten-or-so minutes.

Kenzie flashed him a sharp-toothed grin, her breathing heavier than she'd like to admit. “Yeah, well… You’re not too slow yourself, Jin. Maybe Sensei’s nagging actually got through to you?”

Jin chuckled softly at that, rolling his cybernetic shoulders and flexing the fingers of his artificial hand. "Just trying not to embarrass myself too much for once."

Tom circled the two of them carefully, moving in his usual measured pace, watching both Jin and her for the smallest openings.

The three of them had ended up in this spontaneous three-way sparring match after Sera had gotten dragged off into Sensei’s office.

She still couldn't shake how strangely Sera had acted today—her aggression had felt *way* off, somehow—but what really stuck with her was how Sensei had stepped in so harshly, immediately cancelling their match without hesitation.

That alone was enough to set Kenzie’s mind racing with anxiety.

At first, she tried to be patient, figuring they'd only be gone for a few minutes to straighten things out. But when nearly ten minutes ticked by without any sign of either of them returning, patience had quickly turned into restlessness instead.

She hadn't spent so much extra time practicing with her big sister over the past few days just to stand around doing nothing. No way she was wasting valuable dojo time like this.

Thankfully, Tom and Jin were easygoing enough.

They had readily welcomed her when she had asked to join their practice, quickly agreeing on a simple point-based free-for-all to pass the time. Nothing fancy. A solid hit was one point, and a knock-out strike or something resembling a lethal blow earned three points.

They'd all agreed, of course, to hold back any serious force.

That unfortunately meant that Kenzie had to keep her claws retracted, but that was a small sacrifice to make for not wasting valuable dojo time.

Sensei wasn't around, after all, so nobody wanted to risk hurting each other.

The points were more about accuracy and placement than raw power.

Even still, Tom's unwavering composure irritated Kenzie more than she'd like to admit.

‘*Seriously, how does he stay that damn calm all the time…?*’

He never seemed flustered or rattled—just kept moving and circling patiently, waiting for the perfect moment. It reminded her far too much of her spars with Sera, who made it her personal mission to knock Kenzie off her rhythm whenever she could.

But after dealing with Sera’s mind games all the time, Kenzie felt confident Tom would need a lot more than silent patience to throw her off now.

She narrowed her eyes slightly, ears flattening with determination.

Tom might have her beat on stamina, and Jin's cybernetic punches might be able to break her in half with a good hit, but nobody in this dojo could match her when it came to sheer agility and explosive movement.

It was high-time to remind them of that.

She darted back into motion, bounding swiftly toward Tom once more, only to abruptly veer off and aim at Jin again, using her superior agility to keep both boys guessing.

Jin reacted instinctively, swinging another controlled punch that Kenzie ducked under with practiced ease—Sera's were always a lot faster and far more dangerously placed. As she moved, Tom lunged in, taking advantage of her distracting Jin, his strike landing squarely on Jin's shoulder and knocking him briefly off balance.

"Point for me!" Tom let out with a smile, causing Kenzie to click her tongue.

'That was my fucking point, damnit!'

Jin stumbled back again, cursing under his breath as well.

Kenzie saw her opportunity and pounced—launching herself upwards from the deep crouch she had landed in earlier into an explosive burst of energy. Her strong legs carried her up and over Tom's attempted counter-strike, sailing gracefully in an arc before landing softly behind Jin, ready to score a clean point on him as well—a triple-pointer, at that.

Just as she reached out to slap the back of his head, however, Jin abruptly pivoted—far faster than she'd anticipated possible from him—

Slap!

—blocking her attempt with his cybernetic arm.

She grinned despite the failed strike, heart pounding with exhilaration as they locked eyes for a brief, adrenaline-filled moment.

Just as Jin flashed her a triumphant smirk, Kenzie spotted an opening—Tom had moved just a bit too close, drawn in by their clash and the promise of potentially easy points.

She instantly shifted gears, lunging toward him in a burst of speed that only she could muster. Tom's eyes widened slightly, but his reaction was a half-second too slow as Kenzie gracefully ducked under his guard and shot past him, landing a swift, decisive three-pointer slap to the back of his head.

"Yes!" she hissed victoriously, her ears perked straight up in satisfaction.

Tom recovered irritatingly fast, slipping back into his usual composed, almost bored expression.

Rather than retreating or taking even half a second to reconsider his mistake, he immediately moved into the space Kenzie had just abandoned, smoothly throwing quick, precise jabs.

He caught Jin on the shoulder first, a crisp, clean tap that earned him a single point and left Jin grumbling at his failed attempt to tag Kenzie on her way out. Tom then pivoted abruptly, throwing another punch directly at her—but Kenzie was already twisting mid-air, easily evading Jin's previous, clumsy swing.

She dodged Tom's punch by a hair's breadth by twisting herself further, flashing him a triumphant, fang-filled grin. But the smile instantly vanished when she caught sight of Tom's right foot slicing through the air toward her midsection—she had nowhere left to twist.

Thump!

Pain flashed sharply through her body, confirming Tom had scored another point, as she crashed onto the mat. She quickly turned the landing into a roll, dispersing the impact and narrowly avoiding a harsher injury.

She barely had time to click her tongue in annoyance before Jin charged at her again from the side. The sudden surge of momentum from him caught her completely off-guard—she was still mid-recovery and stumbling backwards when Jin finished closing the gap.

Kenzie desperately threw her arms up to shield herself, but it was hopeless without a good angle to deflect his overwhelming power to. Jin's palm slammed into her arms with a loud slap, effortlessly breaking her guard and leaving her wide open.

Before she could regain her footing, his follow-up strike landed cleanly against her ribs, knocking the breath out of her and earning him a flawless three-pointer.

"Fucking *finally*!" Jin crowed, breathing heavily.

Kenzie shook her head in disbelief, laughter slipping out despite her frustration.

This chaotic rhythm—Tom's irritatingly precise control, Jin's overwhelming bursts of raw strength, and her own swift, explosive agility—was *exactly* the kind of frantic violence she loved in a spar.

The three of them separated naturally, each stepping back to catch their breath after that explosive exchange.

Kenzie doubled over slightly, chest heaving, her ears flicking irritably as sweat dripped down her forehead. Jin wasn't much better off, shoulders rising and falling heavily, looking more exhausted than he probably wanted to admit.

But Tom? He stood there cool and collected, breathing evenly as though he'd just finished a leisurely jog instead of a frantic sparring session. Kenzie shot him a glare, quietly cursing those damned bionic enhancements that let him conserve stamina so effortlessly.

“Fucking bionic-cheat…” she muttered softly, shaking her head as Tom gave her one of his small, annoyingly calm smiles in return.

Just as she readied herself to launch into another attack—partly to wipe that smug expression off Tom’s face—her ears perked up sharply, swiveling toward Sensei’s office door.

It was finally opening.

Kenzie froze mid-step, turning instantly towards it, heart leaping with relief and curiosity.

Sera and Miss K stepped out into the dojo, their expressions unreadable from this distance.

Kenzie’s eyes narrowed slightly, her earlier anxiety about Sensei’s and Sera’s weird behavior bubbling back up to the surface.

‘*What in the world happened in there…?*’

Tom and Jin quickly picked up on her reaction and turned their attention toward the office door as well, just as Sensei’s calm voice carried easily across the dojo.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting,” she called out smoothly, gesturing casually for them to come over. “Glad to see you three kept yourselves busy without causing unnecessary injuries. Nice control and initiative.”

Kenzie jogged toward her without hesitation, Jin and Tom close behind, before falling into their usual lineup formation as Sera stepped quietly over next to her to complete the group.

All of their outfits turned gray again now, having stepped off of the training mats.

“Tom, Jin—you two, take a quick breather. You’ve been going at it nonstop since class started,” Sensei said, immediately surprising all three of them. “Use the time to figure out why Kenzie keeps landing points on you, despite your clear strength advantage.”

Kenzie’s ears perked up sharply, eyes widening slightly.

‘Wait—how did she know about the points? Were they watching us somehow…?’

She flicked a quick glance over to Sera, who was just standing there, face blank and impossible to read.

“And Kenzie,” Sensei’s voice cut into her thoughts, pulling her attention back immediately. “If you’re not completely exhausted yet, I’d like your help testing a few things with Sera. Shouldn’t take too long, but it’s important.”

Kenzie nodded eagerly, already feeling her curiosity spike again. “No problem, Sensei. I can handle it.”

She definitely wasn’t passing up the chance to get a closer look at whatever was going on.

If she declined now, Sensei would undoubtedly choose Tom instead—fresh as always—and she'd be left on the sidelines trying to figure things out secondhand.

No way was she going to let that happen.

"Wonderful news! Thank you," Sensei replied with a relaxed smile. "Sera, Kenzie, line up on your usual sparring mat. I want you two to go at it like always—full contact, going for solid hits. Kenzie, you're cleared to use your claws, as usual."

Kenzie couldn't stop a toothy grin from spreading across her face at Sensei's words.

Finally, things were back to normal—at least sort of.

She bounded over eagerly toward their usual mat, her outfit quickly shifting back into the vibrant blue it always had whenever they sparred inside the dojo.

Still buzzing from the previous match with Jin and Tom, her muscles stayed loose and ready as she instantly sank down into her familiar, low-to-the-ground crouch, ready to spring into action.

Her ears flicked in anticipation as she waited for Sensei's signal—but then her eyes shifted to Sera, and Kenzie immediately sensed something wasn't right.

'*Huh? What the…?*'

Watching Sera move onto the mat was… weird.

Earlier in the day, when Sera had first stepped into the dojo, she'd radiated a tense, unsettling aggression—almost like a threat Kenzie couldn't quite place. It had raised the hair on the back of Kenzie's neck, reminding her a little too closely of the gut-level anxiety she got whenever her huge uncle turned up at full-family meetings.

But this time, looking at Sera felt completely different.

There was no prickling fear crawling up her spine; instead, there was an unease that she couldn't properly place. Watching Sera revealed nothing but an unnatural stillness, like she was watching something mechanical pretending to be human.

It was subtle—almost unnoticeable—but it was unmistakably *there*.

For starters, Sera's natural swagger, for a lack of better word, was completely gone.

Before, Sera had always carried herself with a slight left-sided favoring, something Kenzie had easily spotted in their first extended sparring session. Her older sister had trained her to spot little quirks like these, explaining that everyone had them, even highly trained fighters, until they reached an absurdly advanced skill level.

But now? That familiar favoring had vanished entirely, like it had never even existed.

Sera stood with an eerie symmetry, her weight perfectly balanced, arms raised so steadily it was like gravity had just… stopped existing around her.

Her hands didn't move at all—not even the tiny involuntary twitches or subtle jitteriness that came with the adrenaline before a fight.

The complete change in Sera's stance was even stranger.

It wasn't the brutal aggression from before, nor the scrappy improvisation she usually had. It was something totally new—controlled, precise, and unnaturally still.

Like a machine.

Kenzie swallowed the unease creeping up in her chest and steadied herself, heart beating just a bit faster. Her eyes darted anxiously towards Sensei, who simply gave her a slow, deep nod.

'*She's saying it's okay…*' Kenzie translated the gesture silently, mind racing to try and make sense of whatever was going on here. '*How the fuck did Sera change like this in just thirty minutes? What did Sensei do to her in there…?*'

But before she could puzzle things out any further, Sensei clapped sharply, signaling the start of their match.

Kenzie's body responded immediately, instincts overtaking her confusion as she sank lower into her stance, muscles tensing like coiled springs. She hesitated for just half a second, debating her opening move—but quickly discarded that caution altogether.

No point overthinking it; she was still faster and more agile than anyone else here.

With a burst of explosive speed, Kenzie propelled herself forward, rocketing straight toward Sera. Her claws flexed subconsciously, her entire body ready to pivot at the slightest hint of movement from her opponent.

But that movement never came.

Sera stood there, completely still, utterly motionless.

Her strange stance never wavered—not even the slightest shift in balance or the faintest twitch to indicate a reaction. Confusion immediately surged through Kenzie as she hurtled closer, her eyes widening slightly.

Usually, by the time Kenzie was halfway through this kind of attack, Sera was already shifting to evade, bracing to redirect her momentum, or stepping in aggressively to interrupt.

But now? Nothing.

Alarm bells rang loudly in Kenzie's head, screaming that she was charging headfirst into a trap.

Trusting those instincts, she abruptly pivoted, altering her trajectory mid-dash to skirt just outside Sera's range instead. She transitioned smoothly into a wide, cautious circling maneuver around her unmoving opponent, trying to reassess.

Her eyes locked onto and focused on Sera's every subtle shift—only there weren't any subtle shifts to track.

Sera simply rotated on the spot, matching Kenzie's circling motion with a mechanical, uncanny precision. It felt deeply unnatural, like watching a tracking system lock onto a target rather than a person responding to the ever-changing situations inside a fight.

Kenzie's ears flattened in nervous irritation.

'*What in the actual fuck is going on here…? What is she even doing…?*'

Her eyes darted back towards Sensei, who simply stared back with an unreadable expression plastered on her face.

She clearly wasn't going to get any intel from Sensei; that much was painfully obvious.

With a frustrated sigh, Kenzie slowly started inching toward Sera again, carefully closing the distance, eyes locked onto her opponent, muscles tense and ready. She kept her movement tight and controlled, ready to spring back at a moment's notice.

Nothing.

Kenzie backed off quickly, irritation flaring in her chest as she watched Sera's statue-like form remain utterly motionless—still no visible reaction, not even the faintest hint of movement. Undeterred, she tried twice more, darting forward just enough to bait some kind of response, only to retreat again empty-handed each time.

The frustration built rapidly; it felt like she was shadow boxing with a mannequin rather than fighting an opponent.

*'Come on, give me **something** to work with here, damnit…!'*

Fed up with dancing around and burning through her stamina, Kenzie finally committed to pushing harder. With a burst of speed, she lunged deep into Sera's personal space, close enough that Sera had no choice but to react.

Her claws flashed out sharply, going straight for Sera's midsection.

In an instant, Sera moved—finally responding for the very first time.

Yet, unsurprisingly, Kenzie had anticipated this exact scenario; there had been no other option for Sera, after all.

Her eyes immediately picked up on the movement, reading the punch clearly as it emerged without any other prior tells.

She pulled herself back instinctively, narrowly evading the perfectly executed strike.

She stepped back even further than normal, quickly putting plenty of distance between them again, ears flicking in agitation as she watched Sera casually slip back into that weirdly rigid stance once more.

Kenzie’s breath came out in rapid, shallow bursts as she quickly replayed the brief exchange in her head.

Something was *seriously* off about that punch.

It had been too slow, too deliberate, almost robotic, like Sera hadn't reacted on instinct at all.

Rather, it felt as if she had consciously chosen that exact move ahead of time and followed through with it meticulously, regardless of the circumstances.

And the punch itself? It was perfect.

Way too perfect—like Sera had copied it exactly from Sensei’s blue-shard example.

There hadn't been the slightest personal touch, no subtle adjustments to match the situation—just textbook execution from start to finish.

Kenzie scowled deeply, confusion and annoyance mixing in equal measure.

Sera was definitely far slower than before; that much was obvious. But why? Why was she fighting like this? And why were her movements so… strange?

‘*What the actual fuck did Sensei do to you in there, Sera?*’ she thought, anxiety mingling with irritation at being left completely in the dark.

Her eyes flicked over to Sensei, searching for something—anything—that might clue her in.

Surprisingly, Sensei’s usually calm mask slipped just a bit as she cupped her chin thoughtfully, meeting Kenzie's gaze with an expression that clearly said, "*Keep going.*"

Kenzie huffed softly but nodded.

She wasn't exactly thrilled about the whole secrecy thing, but Sensei probably had her reasons. Still, that didn't stop Kenzie from mentally promising herself that she was going to wring an explanation out of at least one of them by the end of this mess.

Refocusing her attention on Sera, she settled lower into her crouch, claws twitching slightly, muscles tensed and ready. If answers weren't coming easily, she'd just have to force them out the hard way.

Kenzie’s heart was hammering in her chest as she surged back into motion, pushing her agility to the limit. Her feet danced over the mat, darting in and out as she lashed out repeatedly, claws slicing dangerously close to Sera—but never quite hitting their mark.

Sera’s robotic, perfectly-controlled movements made her slow enough to evade easily, but every strike Kenzie threw was blocked or redirected, leaving them locked in a frustrating standstill.

Yet, as their exchanges continued, Kenzie saw a glimmer of hope: Sera’s expression was finally shifting from that blank, emotionless mask to one of genuine confusion and intense focus.

Her brow furrowed deeply, her eyes narrowed, clearly struggling to keep pace with Kenzie's rapid attacks.

'*Good, at least you're still human in there,*' Kenzie thought, a grin tugging at her lips as her confidence surged back to full and the anxiety that had pulled at her receded.

Deciding to push things even further, Kenzie took a deep breath and mentally replayed the new technique her sister had painstakingly taught her just days before—a flashy move she'd specifically requested for sparring against Sera's slippery defenses.

It wasn't designed for this weird new robotic style, but it was worth a shot considering that Sera had somehow lost a great deal of speed and flexibility.

Kenzie lunged in, zig-zagging across the mat at lightning speed, forcing Sera's oddly fluid, mechanical movements to track her increasingly erratic path.

Then, without warning, Kenzie planted one foot and launched herself upward in a graceful, acrobatic flip, twisting upside down mid-air.

Sera's eyes went wide with shock, and she barely managed to raise her arms in time as Kenzie brought her right leg down with explosive force towards Sera's face.

Thwack!

Her kick crashed into Sera's raised arms with a loud impact, rattling her guard badly.

But Kenzie wasn't done yet.

As soon as her hands touched the floor, she immediately sprang up again, using her arms as leverage to spin around, whipping her left leg directly into Sera's exposed ribs.

A satisfying, heavy smack echoed through the dojo as Kenzie's kick landed cleanly, sending Sera sprawling onto the mat with a loud thud and an audible gasp of pain.

"Ahhh, fuck!" Sera cursed loudly, clutching her ribs as she lay there, wincing.

Kenzie was panting heavily, feeling the fatigue from the earlier rounds against Jin and Tom catch up fast—especially after pulling off a flashy move like that.

It was exactly the kind of attack that Dorina had warned her to save for key moments only.

'*She wasn't kidding… That move's fucking amazing, but holy shit does it drain you fast…*'

When Sera finally looked up, their eyes met, confusion and excitement both clearly visible in her expression.

"What the fuck was that move? That was insane!" Sera exclaimed, half-grinning despite clearly still feeling the hit.

Kenzie flashed a smug, toothy smile, her pride immediately inflating a notch. That reaction felt way more like the Sera she knew: Blunt, direct, and easily impressed by cool shit.

“My big sister taught me that one. You like?” Kenzie replied, tossing a playful wink her way.

Sera slowly sat up, still rubbing her side, and shook her head with a weak chuckle.

“Would’ve liked it a hell of a lot more if it didn’t hurt this damn much… Pretty sure you’d have shattered my ribs without these outfits.”

“That’s kinda the point, you absolute blank,” Kenzie immediately shot back, sarcasm dripping from her voice as she smiled even wider.

“Enough of that, you two,” Sensei’s firm voice cut through their playful banter. “Sera, I hope this helped you understand what’s wrong with your approach right now. Kenzie, great job adapting, and that move was very impressive—but be aware that it’s basically useless against anyone not fighting hand-to-hand like Sera. Try pulling that off against a guy with a knife, you’ll end up impaled before you even finish spinning. Try it on a borg, they’ll just catch your leg and use it to smash you into the ground until you’re nothing but paste.”

Kenzie’s ears flattened against her head, embarrassment creeping up her face at the scolding.

She’d already known all of that, obviously, but the move hadn’t exactly been meant for practical use in the first place—it was purely for the satisfaction of finally knocking Sera down after all those humiliating kicks to the head in the last session they had shared.

“Yes, Sensei,” Kenzie replied meekly, ears still flat against her head as Sera echoed quietly beside her, “Yes, Miss K.”

“Good,” Sensei responded enthusiastically, clapping her hands together with a decisive smack. “Kenzie, go rest up. Jin, Tom, get on the mat. That point-based free-for-all you guys did earlier looked fun—let's run that again, but don't hold back this time. Go all-out. If anyone gets hurt, I'll step in immediately. Just no intentional killing blows, obviously.”

Sensei’s gaze flicked meaningfully toward Sera, whose face immediately twisted into a slight grimace.

“Other than that, just have fun with it and keep learning how to handle each other. Jin, Tom, you haven’t fought Sera yet, so this is your chance to practice quickly adapting to an unfamiliar opponent while managing one you already know well. And Sera…”

She paused briefly, sighing a bit dramatically, “Just focus on improving. Honestly, you’ve got way too much to work on to even start giving you specifics right now.”

Kenzie’s eyebrows shot up, grimacing slightly at the blunt assessment. Sensei was always ruthlessly honest, sure, but that had definitely been *extra* harsh—bordering on downright unnecessary, even.

Still, all four of them just nodded dutifully, a quiet chorus of “Yes, Sensei,” “Yes, Master,” and “Yes, Miss K” rising simultaneously as they moved to their positions.

Kenzie gratefully dropped onto the bench, chest still rising heavily from exertion, while Jin and Tom stepped confidently onto the mat, their outfits shifting seamlessly back to blue.

'*At least I finally get a second to breathe and think clearly,*' Kenzie thought, eyes flicking between Sensei and Sera. '*Seriously, just what the fuck has happened to Sera in these past few days…?*'

Her eyes narrowed slightly, glancing toward Sensei as she leaned back against the wall to watch the upcoming match. '*And what happened inside that office…?*'

Those two questions were burning at the front of Kenzie's mind, and she intended to get some answers—one way or another…